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## FROM COMMUNISM TO CAPITALISM VIA THE WARS. THE LANDSCAPE OF SERBIAN MUSIC 1985–2005\*

**Abstract:** Two related processes were taking place in ex-Yugoslavia during the chosen period: 1) The transition from communism to capitalism, and 2) unsuccessful dealing with the political/economical crisis that led to the wars in the 1990s, both followed by the necessity to face the outcome and establish new identities. Although those eventful and tragic two decades have deeply shaken Serbian society, the art music production has not mirrored them in ways that might have been expected. Whereas pacifistic and oppositional political ideas were openly voiced in the public life, the majority of composers wished to distance themselves from explicit engagement in their works. That was probably due to the mistrust that art music, whose influence has always been very limited in the country, could make a strong impact on the political events.

**Key-words:** Serbian art music, music and war, music and politics, transition in Serbia

Like all wars, those that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia during the last decade of the twentieth century have left deep scars on all social levels of the people involved. The armed conflicts that came as a result of a decade-long, steadily increasing, economic and inter-ethnic crisis in that most liberal of all communist countries, began only a year or two after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the successful overturning of East-European communist regimes. All six republics of Yugoslavia had had their first multi-party elections in 1990, which did nothing to prevent the escalation of the tragic and fateful events that followed. So, instead of conducting a peaceful transition to the world of democracy and capitalism, there was a long nightmare, different in duration and intensity in different parts of the disintegrating country. For the Serbian people it started in June 1991 and it has had several phases: the conflicts in Bosnia and Krajina in Croatia were ended in Dayton in 1995; the 78-day-long bombardment of Serbia by the NATO forces finished in June 1999; Slobodan Milošević stepped down from the the position of president following the results of the elections in October 2000; the Serbian province Kosovo proclaimed independence in February 2008.

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\* Овај рад је резултат пројекта *Музика на раскришћу – српски, балкански и европски оквири*, бр. 147033, финансираног од стране Министарства за науку и технолошки развој Републике Србије.

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate reflections of those dramatic historical events in the sphere of the work of composers; namely, to identify possible deviations from developments that could have been expected to happen in normal circumstances.

It should be stressed at the very beginning that, except for several months in 1998 and 1999 in the autonomous province of Kosovo (when the Serbian/Yugoslav Army fought against separatist Albanian paramilitary forces) the territory of Serbia was spared armed conflict, but had the moral obligation to accept several hundred thousand Serbian refugees from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina where the war had lasted one and three years respectively. Everyday life was stressful and the future unforeseeable, cultural sanctions imposed by international organizations were effective for several years, but all institutions functioned, although with great difficulties, so that at least an appearance of normal life was preserved.

In the years preceding the outbreak of the war (1991) Serbian music produced a number of outstanding works and the overall view of the period was that of rich diversity. After the first confrontations with Postmodernism in music around 1980, different aspects of that idea began to gain ever more space in the works of Serbian composers. The new music, mainly that of the youngest composers, assimilated impulses from the spheres of jazz and rock music, which influenced the creation of works with elements of repetition and minimalism. Some of the finest examples of serious engagement with postmodernist re-evaluations of traditional form and tonality can be found in the works of Zoran Erić (b.1950), especially in his *Talea Konzertstück* for violin and orchestra (1989). It could be said that Erić's music occupied centre stage in Serbian musical landscape. Quite a large group of composers were positioned in the broad area open to novel interpretations of the twentieth-century musical legacy, such as Dušan Radić (b.1929), Dejan Despić (b.1930), Rajko Maksimović (b.1935), Milan Mihajlović (b.1945), Vlastimir Trajković (b.1947), Ivan Jevtić (b.1947) and Vuk Kulenović (b. 1946). Two composers were most inclined to introduce new technology into their works: Vladan Radovanović (b.1932), the most consistent of the avant-gardists who composed mainly electro-acoustic music, but did not neglect radiophonic works or the metamusical sphere; then, Srdjan Hofman (b.1944) who explored the possibilities of electro-acoustic music in modernist and postmodernist approaches.

A special place in Serbian music of the 1980s, as well as of whole twentieth century, was occupied by Ljubica Marić (1909–2003) who had returned to composing after a longish break. During the 1980s she created several chamber works that draw inspiration from the same ancient

sources (Serbian church and folk music) as her previous works, creating the same modernistically intense and compressed expression: *Chants Out of Darkness*, recitative cantata for voice and piano (1984), *Monody of the Octoechos* for solo cello (1984), and *Asymptote* for violin and string orchestra (1986). During that same decade the number of women composers, already relatively high, continued to rise. New generations of women were certainly encouraged by the success of Ljubica Marić.<sup>1</sup> Among her most creative successors was Ivana Stefanović (b.1948), who provided evidence of this when still a young composer with *Whither with the Bird on the Palm*, for percussion and tape, made at Ircam in Paris, 1980. Another female composer whose talent was quickly recognised was Katarina Miljković (b.1959). She created a subtle atmosphere, mixing sound and noise in her minimalist and repetitive works (*E silentio* for voice, prepared piano, strings and tape, 1987).

The jubilees of two important Serbian historical events, six hundred years since the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and three hundred years since the Great migration of Serbs from their lands occupied by the Turks to the Austrian empire (1690) inspired several composers to contribute to the celebrations. Here will be mentioned three of the works that were composed in a rather traditional vein but whose significance was not just occasional: *The Passion of St. Prince Lazarus* for chorus and orchestra (1989) by Rajko Maksimović, *Legacy of Kosovo* for chorus and orchestra (1989) by Ivan Jevtić, *Psalm* (no. 137) for choir by Dejan Despić (1990), *And there came no succour* for ancient instruments and choir (1989) and *Psalm* for soloist and choir (1990) by Ivana Stefanović. It is questionable if those and similar works should be observed as nationalistic, as has been done sometimes. The choice of texts for those works shows a revived interest for national history and cultural heritage, which was to be expected in the threatening socio-political climate of the late 1980s. The works themselves usually possessed quite discreet ingredients of folk and church music. As to their authors, their behaviour in the following dramatic period proved that their political attitudes were as a rule non-nationalistic.

For the first time after 1945 new church music was composed, which could be linked to better relations between the State and the Serbian Orthodox Church in those years of the intensification of nationalistic feelings in all parts of Yugoslavia. Only a handful of composers showed interest for that genre (among them Svetislav Božić, b.1954, Aleksandar Vujić, b.1945, Dimitrije Golemović, b.1954) and this stayed

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<sup>1</sup> Among those who deserve mentioning are: Mirjana Živković (b.1935), Svetlana Maksimović (b.1948) and Vera Milanković (b.1953).

so throughout the next decade, the 1990s. In their works for choir a cappella, those composers followed quite strictly the compositional technique of Stevan Mokranjac, the great Serbian composer who had lived a century before. Their conservative approach together with official recognition and awards, provoked a lot of criticism from their colleagues who found their music too functionalised and responsive to the needs of the times.

In those same years a group of very young, talented composers, some of them still students, made their appearance on the Serbian art music scene. They called themselves auto-ironically 'The Magnificent Seven' and organised their first concert in 1988. Their members were: Vladimir Jovanović (b.1956), Srdjan Jaćimović (1960–2006), Ognjen Bogdanović (b.1965), Nataša Bogojević (b.1966), Igor Gostuški (b.1966), Isidora Žebeljan (b.1967), and Ana Mihajlović (b.1968). They were ambitious and impatient to get recognition for their works, into which they introduced elements of popular music. Among their first works to gain attention was Nataša Bogojević's *Different Forms of Sounding of the Rose and Cross* for piano, prepared piano and harpsichord (1989). Preoccupied by their world of music, these young composers hardly noticed that their country was nearing some big events — not only the end of the communist era, but also the break-out of secessionist wars that would change dramatically the map of their country and the fate of millions of people.

It is understandable why consideration of Serbian music of the last decade of the twentieth century usually invites questions about scars left on it by wars and other turbulent events in the country. Conditions for creative work—like life itself—were almost unbearable. Apart from the war itself, sanctions imposed by international organisations in the field of cultural exchange threatened any dedication to composition. There were anti-war protests by composers and other musicians, but they could not, of course, influence the tragic events. A protest was organized in June 1992 when around fifty composers knelt in a central Belgrade park, symbolically asking the president Milošević to step down from power. A number of composers also signed a protest against war and cultural sanctions during the 1st International Festival of Contemporary Music (*Tribina*, Novi Sad / Sremski Karlovci, May 1992). A few middle-aged composers emigrated to the United States of America, Canada or Western Europe (Vuk Kulenović, Svetlana Maksimović), but most emigrants belonged to younger generations (Katarina Miljković, Ognjen Bogdanović, Nataša Bogojević, Ana Mihajlović, Igor Gostuški, Milica Paranosić).

There is no doubt that the several-year-long pressure of the threat of war and the war operations in neighbouring territories had negative in-

fluences on the everyday life of the whole population of Serbia, including composers and musicians, but it is difficult to pinpoint specific effects of those circumstances on the work of composers. The shock produced by the actual beginning of the war at the end of June 1991 had certainly annihilated the wish of composers to work, but little by little, they recovered and started composing again. The second half of 1991 must have been marked by very low quantity of new works, but that cannot be proved, as statistical data are not available. As to the main features of the works composed during the whole last decade of the century, they essentially stayed the same as they were before the tragic events began. The great majority of the new music could not be linked in any way to the surrounding catastrophe. On the programmes of the single annual festival of contemporary music (*Tribina*, Novi Sad / Belgrade) at which only most recent works were performed, the majority of works focused on the 'purely musical' or subjects other than political, such as *Ozone of Homeland* by Dejan Despić, on the lyric poems of Desanka Maksimović (1991), *Music for piano and strings* (1991) by Aleksandar Obradović, *Concerto for Viola and Orchestra* (1992) by Vlastimir Trajković, *Musica concertante* for piano, strings and electronics (1992) by Srdjan Hofman, *Sonority of Twittering Machine* (1993) for horn and strings, inspired by Paul Klee's paintings, by Nataša Bogojević, *Prélude à l'avant-midi d'un faune* for flute and strings (1994) by Rajko Maksimović,<sup>2</sup> etc. Vladan Radovanović mainly continued his works in the domain of multimedia, which he defined more precisely as 'synthetic', stressing that in those works all media should be of equal importance and at the same time mutually dependant. A characteristic example of that can be seen in *Constellations* (1997), a complex work for mixed electronics, in which three components belonging to different media are active: sound, visual and kinetic.

On the other hand, there were composers who felt the need to express their feelings about the whole situation, usually very discreetly in verbal comments to their works. For her *Clinical Quartet* (1991) the young composer Svetlana Kresić was inspired by a poem in which the author Božidar Milidragović alluded to the tragic inter-ethnic conflict that was happening at the time. Vojin Komadina (1933–1997), a refugee from Bosnia, composed *Sad Songs* for voice and piano (1992) on the poems by Dušan Trifunović, another refugee from Bosnia. Still a student at that time, Jovana Stefanović composed *The City of Mirrors* for two

<sup>2</sup> Maksimović's words on the piece are characteristic: 'This work was composed during one of the darkest times we have ever had. I tried to reach in it the spheres of pure beauty, without any drama [...]'. Quoted from the programme booklet of the concert given by the Symphonic Orchestra and Choir of Radio Television Belgrade, on 10 February 2008.

pianos (1993), giving a clue to its meaning in a comment published in the concert programme: '*The City of Mirrors* refers to the city inhabited by the tribe of Aureliano Babilonia from Marquez' novel [*Hundred Years of Solitude*]. The men of the city are seized by the madness of making war, while the women fight against destruction (...)'.<sup>3</sup> There are also works whose titles could indicate a reference to the political circumstances (although it is difficult to be sure about it), such as Vlastimir Trajković's *Sonata for violin and piano D major* whose movements bear the titles: 1. Repressing irrepressible panic, 2. Calm by force, but in vain anyway, 3. Irascibly, without end.<sup>4</sup> When asked if he had ever wished to introduce any political message into his works, another composer, Zoran Erić replied that perhaps that could be said of his work *I have not spoken* (1995), but that its inner musical *raison d'être* was most important.<sup>5</sup> Commenting on the fact that that piece was a part of the cycle *Images of Chaos*, I-IV, 1990–95, Erić stated that 'chaos' could be related both to chaos theory, so popular among intellectuals in the two last decades of the twentieth century, and to the situation in the country — the isolation, helplessness, aggression in everyday communication, the rise in crime etc.

Much more direct was Ivana Stefanović's message in *Lacrimosa* for tape (1993). She composed a moving work constructed with quotations from 'lacrimosae' by Mozart, Pergolesi, Verdi, Britten, Penderecki, and also fragments from the 'opelos' (requiems) of Mokranjac and Hristić. By using radiophonic techniques these quotations were treated as musical material and intertwined with recordings of sounds from the streets of Sarajevo and Belgrade on the eve of the war and later. One should also note *A Nocturne of Belgrade Spring 1999* (1999–2000) for chamber ensemble, live electronics and audio tape by Srdjan Hofman. The composer used his own recording of the nocturnal sounds of May 1999, when bombs were falling on Belgrade and whole Serbia. Contrary to expectations, the tape recorded 'silence and sounds of a suburban night'.<sup>6</sup> The composed music of the work is built out of six rhythmic-intervallic models which result from 'a game with friends' and acquaintances' phone numbers'.<sup>7</sup> In *VrisKrik.exe (ScreamingCry.exe)*, 1999, for live electronics and orchestra by the young Jasna Veličković (b.1974), the omnipresent anguish was expressed by the author's manipulations with recordings of her own suffocating and crying.

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<sup>3</sup> Bulletin no. 2 of *Tribina* 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Bulletin of *Tribina* 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Erić was interviewed by the author of this paper in May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Author's comment in the bulletin no. 1 of the IX *Tribina*, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Dejan Despić reacted to the brutal events in two ways. He successively composed works such as *Dies irae* for oboe, violin, viola, cello and piano (1992), with musically transposed symbols of death and hate, and works that ignored such a reality (*Concerto sereno* for piano and orchestra, 1993). Despić expressed his views on composers' attitudes towards the tragic events and massive suffering in the following way: 'It is one of the virtues of music, and at the same time one of the privileges of composers in relation to writers, poets and painters, that its language is not explicit, thus it has plural meanings and possible messages. Therefore, the mark of the times that it possesses, is sometimes clearly visible or faintly seen, while at other times it is hidden. A piece of music can be clear and direct response of a composer to concrete events, situations or challenges. Such engaged art is, however, always threatened by dangers to which not only street singers of newly composed patriotic songs succumb. A necessary process and indispensable measure of sublimation make so that in fact sometimes more engaged is a work that does not appear to be such [...] The cathartic effect is the best possible engagement! It can be realised in two quite different ways. One is more direct: by empathy and identification with sufficiently clear ideas expressed in music, primarily on the basis of their texts, be it programmes or titles. The other one acts by the power of contrasts, thus in an indirect way – not necessarily producing a weaker effect! [...] In that way the listener is taken to his own shelter in some other, lovelier and gentler world, in recreating some past lights, or visions of some future ones.'<sup>8</sup>

Most of the composers who emigrated to Western countries have maintained good relations and contacts with fellow-composers who stayed in Serbia. The case of Vuk Kulenović (b.1946) is a little different and deserves a short comment. He was born in Sarajevo, studied in Ljubljana and Belgrade, where he stayed from the late 1970s. While in Belgrade his work was very much admired. In 1993 he obtained a Fulbright scholarship and afterwards stayed in the USA. He was initiator of the anti-Milošević protest of 'kneeling' in June 1992. When listening to his *Boogie* for piano and orchestra (1992), the Belgrade public recognised its ecstatic mood and explosive repetitive rhythmic energy as 'music of despair'.<sup>9</sup> Asked one year later if he still reacted to the catastrophic events in the same way, he answered: 'I believe that *Boogie* would be the same, no matter the circumstances. I think that people liked the music in the first place...'.<sup>10</sup> As emigrant Kulenović has broken all ties with Ser-

<sup>8</sup> Dejan Despić, 'Pečat (ne)vremena', *Muzički talas* 1 (1994), 1–2.

<sup>9</sup> Zorica Premate, 'Blistavi fetiš oćavanja', *Novi Zvuk* 2 (1993), 119–128.

<sup>10</sup> Bulletin no. 2 of *Tribina* 1993.

bia. It is interesting that in the latest edition of the New Grove's Dictionary (2001) the entry about him presents him as a Yugoslav composer, whereas all other ex-Yugoslav composers had to have their new national identity or citizenship stated. On the Internet information about his career displays some minor, but significant changes as regards his past. One can read there that he was forced to flee the country (which was not the case), the new title of *Boogie* is *War Boogie*, etc. It is quite possible that the composer is not to be blamed for those changes, but that it is his manager who, like all managers, has his own views on commercial effects.

The years since 2000, when the post-Milošević era began (itself marked by difficulties in overcoming the heavy consequences of the 1990s), have not shown any significant changes in the Serbian musical landscape. It is impossible to designate any work composed in this period that would have even slight allusions to the terrible past decade. There are good signs that Serbian composers, especially the younger ones, are building good ties with the international circles for new music. The premiere of the chamber opera *Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan in Amsterdam in 2005 and its subsequent performances in different European cities, including Belgrade, range among the most outstanding successes of Serbian music ever.

Outside the ambit of this paper has been Serbian popular music, dominated by the so-called 'newly composed folk music', which contrary to art music, did respond, and usually very promptly, to the events on the social and political scene. There are already many studies of that sphere, of its nationalistic excesses, bad taste, and media manipulation, in the times already behind us, so that anybody interested can find enough information. The position of composers of art music was different, as we have seen.

Although the eventful and tragic two decades 1985–2005 have deeply shaken Serbian society, art music production has not mirrored them in ways that might have been expected. Whereas pacifist and oppositional political ideas were openly voiced in public life, the majority of composers wished to distance themselves from explicit political engagement in their works. That was probably due, at least partly, to their doubts concerning their ability to be up to the task and escape propagandistic effects. Most of them must have also been sceptical that art music, whose influence has always been very limited in the country, could make a stronger impact on the political events. The anguish and disillusion of the war times were thus most often expressed in indirect and subtle ways.



*Мелита Милин*

ИЗ КОМУНИЗМА У КАПИТАЛИЗАМ ПРЕКО РАТОВА.  
ПЕЈЗАЖ СРПСКЕ МУЗИКЕ 1985–2005  
(Резиме)

Циљ овог рада је да истражи деловање драматичних збивања из последње деценије XX века на тлу бивше Југославије на стваралаштво у области уметничке музике у Србији. Да би се добила рељефнија слика, у разматрање су укључене и године које су претходиле кризним деведесетим и оне које су уследиле за њима. Истакнуто је да је српска музичка сцена у годинама пред рат била необично богата и разноврсна и у блиској комуникацији са међународним токовима. Ратне године донеле су многе трауме, укључујући политичку и културну изолацију земље – амбијент крајње неповољан за стваралачки рад. У погледу стилских карактеристика композиторског стварања, није дошло до неких значајнијих промена. Велика већина нових дела није се могла довести у везу са катастрофалним догађајима, већ је била усмерена ка „чисто музичкој сфери“ и темама ван политике (*Озон завичаја* Д. Деспића, *Концерт за виолу и оркестар* В. Трајковића, *Сазвежђа* В. Радовановића). Било је, међутим, и композитора који су осећали потребу да изразе своје доживљаје актуелне ситуације, а то су обично чинили дискретно, у насловима и/или вербалним коментарима својих дела (*Сlike хаоса* З. Ерића, *Град огледала* Јоване Стефановић). Директније од других у том погледу је радиофонско дело *Lacrimosa* Иване Стефановић у коме су коришћени одломци познатих реквијема и опела. Неки композитори су реаговали двојако, наизменично стварајући дела која су била усредсређена на теме страха и смрти и она у којима је брутална реалност игнорисана (Д. Деспић). У периоду који је уследио после кризних деведесетих није нарушен дотада успостављени лик српске савремене музике.

Можда разлоге за стваралачко дистанцирање од актуелних догађаја из деведесетих година код претежног дела српских композитора треба тражити у њиховом страху од пропагандистичких и плакатних резултата. Осим тога, вероватно су били скептични у погледу снаге утицаја коју би уметничка музика могла да има у датим околностима.

У раду није посвећена пажња српској популарној музици која је, за разлику од уметничке, реаговала, и то врло брзо, на догађаје на друштвеној и политичкој сцени. О тој теми је, уосталом, доста писано и код нас и у иностранству.

UDC 316.423:78.038.6[497.11]»1985/2005»